

SILAS HOUSE

TOTAL IMMERSION

AFTER LIZ TELLS HER, CHARMA DOESN'T say anything for a long moment. She is sitting on the couch, smoking a cigarette with one hand and patting the baby's back with the other. "Saved?" she says, as if completely baffled. The word comes out in one great plume of smoke. The baby is sprawled out asleep across the top of her legs. "Tell me you're kidding, Mother."

Liz balances on the edge of her chair and pulls off her panty hose. Her big toe has broken through, just as always. "Why would I kid over such a thing, Charma? You don't kid over stuff to do with the Lord — that's dangerous."

Charma laughs. Her laugh is clear and pretty. Men melt for it. "You are the worst sinner I know, Mother. People actually refer to you as 'The Whore of Black Banks.'" Charma laughs some more. She shakes her head, carelessly flicks her cigarette toward the ashtray.

"Just that one woman," Liz says. She pulls her legs up under herself and rubs her feet.

"Because you were having an affair with her husband!" Charma plays with the baby's thin hair. He is four months old and his scent has spread across the whole room. The whole house smells like Johnson's baby bath. "You're still having an affair with him. How are you going to handle that, now that you've took up going to church?"

Liz looks out the window, even though it is covered by sheers so thick they can't be seen through. The sunlight is very bright there, causing them to glow. They look electric and alive. "I guess I'll just have to quit him."

"Yeah right," Charma says. She is always saying this, and she has a certain way of emphasizing "right" that drives Liz crazy. Liz feels like jumping up from the chair and leaning across the coffee table to smack her daughter's face.

"When hell freezes over, you'll quit him." Charma picks up the remote and aims it at the television, a signal that she is finished with this conversation.

"It'd be nice to come home from church and have somebody be tickled that I got saved," Liz says. "Most daughters would love for their mothers to join church."

"I would, too, if I didn't think it was just another one of your phases."

Liz gets up and goes to her room. She moved in with Charma four months ago when her landlord kicked her out. She has a good-paying job at the yarn factory, but she has never been able to save money. She blows her paycheck every weekend because she can't be with her boyfriend, Bruce, then. He has to be with his wife, Lanie, who wears a 1980's hairdo — she even has bangs — and saucer-sized dabs of rouge. So Liz spends her money at the honky-tonks and has people over for grill-outs on Sundays. She buys family packs of ribeyes and baking potatoes. Plus she has that big debt to the collection agency and they take a chunk of that out of her check. She wouldn't live with Charma if she had anywhere else to go. They get along fine as long as they never see one another.

Her room is small and dark. There are clothes all over the floor and the remnants of last night's supper — a combo from Long John Silver's — are strewn out on the nightstand. She sits down at her vanity table and looks in the mirror. She is finally starting to show her fifty years. People have never been able to guess how old she is. She was thirty before she ever got carded at the liquor store. But now her face is lined with her mistakes. Her eyes seem drawn at the corners and her mouth is starting to pinch and grow smaller.

She always thought she would feel different when she got saved. But she doesn't. She always imagined that she would feel so clean — inside and out — and that a light would radiate from her face. She had thought

it would feel as if God had reached down and grabbed her beneath the ribs to pack her around as if she was floating, her feet dangling just over the floor. She has thought about going to church for the last year or so. She knows this is the only way she can ever get away from Bruce. He is a force of nature. Black wavy hair and blue eyes and a tender voice that whispers when he is trying to charm her. His breath is always hot and sweet. He keeps a Cert in his mouth all the time, even when he is smoking. He goes on trips to the riverboats in Cincinnati where he and his wife gamble. He plays the tables but Lanie only offers herself to the slot machines. She is too conservative to risk playing 21. On these trips, Bruce sneaks into the fancy shops on the riverboats and buys Liz expensive outfits with his winnings. He brings them to her in plastic covers like you get at the drycleaners. She can never understand how he sneaks these things past Lanie.

She and Bruce cannot go to public places like the riverboats or the racetrack or even the Shoney's right here in town. They can only go to secret places. They spend a lot of time on the lake in Bruce's bass boat. It is red and has what Bruce calls a "meadowflake" finish. The meadowflakes glisten in the sun. They fish for a while and then Bruce always says he finds it incredibly sexy that Liz is willing to bait her own hook and take her own fish off the line. She loves catching bluegills, she loves the way he looks at her when she reels one in. She knows how much he loves that little squeal she lets curl from her mouth, knows how excited he gets by seeing her bent over the side of the boat to slide the fish into their basket. After they have fished for a few minutes he speaks to her in that low, breathy way and she always finds herself lying back on the scratchy boat-carpet. With his weight upon her, sometimes she can feel the water moving beneath them — even through all that fiberglass — and it is like being in a dream. It is like floating.

All this will have to change. She will not go to church and have an affair. She was raised to know better than that, anyway. When she rededicated her life today, her sister, Avalene, who had forced her to go to church with her, said this: "Liz, you was always the biggest sinner ever was. And most of the time the biggest sinners make the biggest Christians."

Avalene is right. Liz will give her all to serving the Lord. She will be baptized next Sunday and will invite everyone she knows. She will start praying to receive the Holy Ghost so she can shout and dance around the altar. She will sing with the choir and eventually teach Sunday school and go on retreats with the young people to Gatlinburg. She thinks it is funny, how the church-people all say "young people," as if "teenagers" is a bad word they can't fit their mouths around. The

young people will like her because she will not be a prude. When they ask her if she thinks rock n roll is bad, she will lean forward and say "Of course not" with a great air of confidentiality. Because really, she doesn't think it's bad. Sometimes music like that makes her feel even more in touch with God. Sometimes when she is dancing she feels like she is celebrating life, and that has to be a good thing. But she can't think about that right now. She will sort all of that out later.. Because she knows that dancing is against the church. So is rock n roll. Still, the teenagers will think of her as the cool Sunday school teacher. She will never call them "the young people" to their faces.

She wonders how she can still have her Sunday grill-outs. All her friends like to drink. They sit out on Charma's back deck and drink beer. Liz always fills the baby's plastic pool with ice and bottles of Michelob. The baby is too young for the pool anyway, and Liz has no idea why Charma has bought it. This is something that she is known for—the ice-filled baby pool—and she likes doing something no one else does. After they eat her salads and her steaks and drink her beer, they like to sit around and play poker. They cuss and sometimes get drunk and often get into fights. But then everyone comes back again and they are all the best of friends. She hates the thought of losing them, but a Christian woman cannot have that going on. Maybe she can talk some of them into going to church with her.

She looks at herself a while longer and decides that she will feel differently after she is baptized. Right now she feels exactly the same. At church she had felt a moment of pure ecstasy when she knelt at the altar to pray. There were many hands on her, women who prayed out loud in great breathless pleadings. The women cried and begged the Lord to forgive Liz her sins. The choir started up and they played a real fast song—"God's not dead oh no no no He's still alive Oh God's not dead, he's still alive"—and some of the women started shouting and speaking in tongues and Liz thought she could feel the Holy Ghost running up and down her back, like warm water. She couldn't help but to cry and it seemed she had never had such a cleansing cry before. When she sat in her room alone and cried over Bruce—knowing that he was off somewhere with his wife—her tears always seeped out slow and hot, but at church her whole body had shuddered and the tears had felt cool on her face. She had tasted their salt on her lips.

"Mother?" Charma shouts, slapping her palm against Liz' door. Liz hates being called Mother. Every other girl she knows says "mommy," but not Charma. Even when she was little, she addressed her in such a way. And to other people she just called her mother "Liz," as if they are not a drop of kin. "What are you doing in there?"

Liz starts to throw the door open but thinks better of it. A Christian woman has to have a good demeanor. Avalene calls it “letting your light shine.” Avalene gave her advice all the way home from church today. She said how Liz had to stop wearing so much makeup and never wear pants and let her hair grow out and stop cussing and most importantly she had to let her light shine. Liz musters up a smile when she opens the door.

Charma greets this with a smug laugh, so quiet that Liz would not even recognize it except for the lift of Charma’s shoulders. “Can you watch the baby this evening? Roger Lanham wants to take me to the theater.”

Charma always says “theater,” too. She will not say “the movies.”

“I was planning on going to church tonight, Charma.”

“Well, can’t you take him? It’d be good for him to go.” Charma lights a cigarette off the burning embers of her last.

“He’s four months old, honey. If he got anything out of church at all, it’d be the Sunday school.”

“Well fine, then!” Charma yells and stomps away. At the end of the hall she turns around and says, “See, you haven’t changed a bit. Same old selfish Liz.”

“All right then,” Liz says. This has always been their problem. Liz has never known whether she was the child or the boss. She feels more like Charma is her sister than daughter. Charma seems to go out every night now. She is a good-looking girl and she has this big fine apartment, which the father of her baby pays for every month. He does this because he is a federal lawyer and doesn’t want his wife to know that Charma has had a child by him. He even drew up a contract that Charma signed, saying she would remain silent unless he didn’t pay child support and the rent. Charma tells all her friends that she is “set for life.” Last week she wanted a new living room suite and a big-screen television. When the lawyer refused to buy it, she said she’d call his wife. He reminded her of the contract but Charma simply blew a line of smoke across the telephone receiver and spoke calmly. “That paper might hold up in court, but she’ll still know.” Next day, the Furniture-Town van pulled in and unloaded her order.

Liz watches her own daughter twist her way down the hall and feels as if they don’t know each other at all. Perhaps comparing their

relationship to sisterhood is all wrong. They are simply two people who have been forced to go through life together.

LIZ TAKES THE BABY TO CHURCH that night. Avalene comes and picks them up. It is a hot night but the air conditioner doesn't work and Avalene doesn't want her hair messed up, so she won't roll down the windows and Liz sweats in her new dress, which she bought at the Fashion Bug today. All her dresses for honky-tonking were either too short or too low-cut.

Liz glances back at the baby, who is content — he loves riding in cars — and then cracks the window. She lights a cigarette and blows the smoke toward the stream of air that is whistling in.

"What are you doing?" Avalene says. They are stopped at a red light so she is able to glare at Liz for a long moment.

Liz doesn't know what she is talking about.

"You're smoking! We'll go to church smelling like smoke, Liz. Just throw that pack out, now honey. That craving will be took from you. You won't want things of the world anymore."

"I doubt smoking will send me to Hell, Avalene," Liz says, watching for the light to change, since Avalene is not.

"But it will, honey," Avalene says, as if she is certain not only of this, but of everything. "Your body is a temple."

Liz lets the cigarette drop out of the little space at the top of the window but doesn't throw out her pack.

Everyone at the church is happy to see her. Actually, they look stunned, as if they never expected her to come back and their big smiles and laughter seems to be out of speechlessness more than anything. All of the women rub her back in a perfect circle. Liz notices that they all look tired and pale. Maybe it is because they are not wearing makeup. But there is something in their eyes that makes her long for them. She wants to wrap her arms around the women and tell them that she loves them. She doesn't know why; maybe this is part of being a Christian. It seems like something Christ would do.

The baby seems to love church. He bounces on Liz's lap when the choir sings. Everybody plays with him and runs a finger over his soft hair.

The ladies in front of her all ask to hold him, and she lets them. He is happy against their big, warm breasts. Liz cannot follow the preacher tonight. He paces all over the church, hollering and stomping. The crowd nearly drowns him out with their amens. He is talking about the Rapture. She catches something about Jesus Parting the Sky and the Twinkling of An Eye. She remembers Zelda, her best friend at work, once telling her that in a Pentecostal church, there are only three sermons. "The rapture, the holy ghost, and the offering," Zelda said. She feels bad for letting Zelda talk this way.

When the sermon is over, she feels as if she has been in a daze. She is only brought awake when the altar call starts. She loves to hear them sing, especially the fast songs when they pound the tambourines and everybody starts speaking in tongues. She can't help moving about in her seat. The music is good enough to dance to.

That night, she calls Bruce. He has told her to never call his house and really she ought to wait to talk to him at work tomorrow. He is her supervisor and she can go into his sound-proof office anytime she wants. She likes it there not only because of him but also because you can't hear the grind of the yarn machines while there. It is like walking out of a storm into a safe place. But she can't wait to talk to him. Luckily, he answers the phone.

"Bruce?"

He whispers. She can picture him hunkering into himself as he talks. She can hear a television playing in the background and wonders if he and Lanie have been lying on the couch together, watching the news. Bruce watches CNN all the time. He cannot get enough of it. He says it is important to stay informed.

"I told you to never call me here." He's mad.

"I'm sorry, but I have to talk to you. Can't you act like you're out of smokes or something? Meet me at the Dairy Mart?"

"Ten minutes," he says and hangs up.

Charma is still not back, and Liz had not thought of this before calling Bruce, so she just loads the baby up and heads out. He is asleep anyway and won't know a thing. Bruce will just have to get in the car with her.

He does. He pulls in and simply slides from his car to hers. She thought that maybe that same old feeling wouldn't come to her upon seeing

him, but it does. She still feels that sizzle in her stomach. He is still good-looking to her. The only thing is that she realizes for the first time that he knows he is good looking, too. And she realizes that this is exactly why she has always been so attracted to him. Conceit is something that is appealing to her.

It is as if he had been expecting her call, because he is fixed up. He is wearing dress shorts and boat shoes. And he is wearing a shirt she bought for him, a green polo shirt with that little horse emblem over his heart. Her favorite shirt that she bought him is one that he never, ever wears. It says FISHERMAN DO IT IN THE WATER. She wonders what he has done with it and bets Lanie has sold it in one of those huge yard sales she is famous for. She probably won't let him wear such a thing. Lanie is Presbyterian. Liz doesn't know much about that denomination, but Bruce says they worry a lot about what other people think.

"Where have you been, all decked out?" she asks.

"We went to the steak house this evening."

Another place they can't go. The only place they ever eat is at the boat dock. Greasy hamburgers wrapped in wax paper. Or in the break room at work. Nabs and a Pepsi, or sometimes a bag of popcorn they put in the microwave. Every time she smells microwaved popcorn, she thinks of him. It is the same with the air on the lake and Eternity for Men cologne. These smells are her connection to him, and she will never be able to rid herself of him in this way. By way of scent, he will always be with her.

"What is it?" he asks. "I don't have much time."

She lights a cigarette. Although she knows this act won't go along good with what she is about to say, her nerves need the nicotine. "I got saved this morning. I'm going to start going to church."

"Church? Have you lost your mind? You're not ready for that."

"I have to do something. I've got to have some kind of life. I'm not going to have one with you—you're never going to leave her."

"I can't, Liz. You know that." He looks around to make sure that no one can see them. Her Mustang has tinted windows, so nobody can. "What's the use leaving her if she gets everything? Would you want a man with nothing?"

Liz looks at her cigarette and throws it out the window. "I've never had anything before. Why should now be any different?" She holds onto the steering wheel very tightly, as if she is driving around a sharp curve. "It don't matter now, anyway. I want you to come to my baptism."

Bruce makes a sound like his words are caught in the back of his throat. Then he assembles them properly. "Now I know you've lost your mind."

Liz doesn't feel anything at all. She feels empty. There is not even that yearning of wanting to be filled up by something. She looks straight ahead. "I'm going to try to do right, Bruce. We have to quit this."

Bruce flips down the visor and looks at himself in the mirror. "You're not church-going material, Liz. You're just not made that way."

She starts the car and checks the rearview mirror, which she has adjusted so she can see the baby. He is still sound asleep. After a long silence of Bruce just staring at her, she says, "Get out, Bruce. I'm done."

"We'll talk about this more at work," he says, not even looking at her now. Scanning the parking lot. The lights from the store are bright and his face looks very pale in their glare. She thinks of his brown shoulders, speckled by water. Sometimes they go up into a cove and skinny dip. They lie back naked on the boat and the sun catches in the little wet orbs on his slick skin. She shakes this image out of her mind.

"There's nothing else to say," she says, and with her foot on the brake, slides the gear down into reverse. "Go on."

He doesn't argue, but he lets out one of those sighs that used to unnerve her. It used to send her into a frenzy, thinking she had upset him. But now she doesn't care. She is at peace with the world. He gets out and shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his Duck Head shorts. He stands there only for a second before looking around quickly, making sure no one has seen him. She sits there with the car running even after he has driven away.

THAT WEEK, LIZ AVOIDS BRUCE AT WORK. She ignores him when he taps her on the shoulder and tells her to come to his office. When he walked by, the musk of his cologne trailed behind. She even ignores him in the break room, where he stands by the microwave, waiting for his corn to pop. But she has to make herself not look at him. He always wears Dockers to work, and they look so good on him. She has always liked to see him in dress socks and penny

loafers. She tries to not think about all that, though. She focuses on her yarn line and lets the noise of the factory force Bruce out of her head.

On break, she talks about church to the rest of the girls. None of them can believe it. They want to know what they will do about Saturday nights, when they all get together and go to The Spot, where they each take turns buying pitchers of Michelob and are the most popular table of women in the whole place. They want to know how they can talk to her like they used to. They all claim to respect her decision, though—even Zelda—and she thinks they are genuinely happy for her.

Avalene bought her a whole garbage bag full of skirts at the Catholic store in town, and Liz wears them to work. She doesn't feel right in pants any more. It is what Avalene called "being condemned." Avalene said, "If wearing eye makeup and pants condemns you, then you ought not do it. That feeling of being condemned is God whispering in your ear. Doubt is just God, warning us."

The closer it gets to Sunday, the more nervous Liz becomes, as if the baptism were an impending job interview that she is not prepared for. Avalene talks about it all the time. She verses Liz in all the ways of the church, as their mother never had taken them growing up and none of Liz's ex-husbands ever wanted to go. Avalene told her that it is the freshest feeling, when you rise up out of that water. "It really feels just like they say—as if your sins have been washed away," she says. The Pentecostals practice total immersion, and this is the main thing Liz dreads. She can't stand being under water. It smothers her to death. Once she had been on a pontoon at the lake, everybody drunk, and somebody had pushed her in as a joke. Although she is a good swimmer, when she went under, she lost it. She came up hyperventilating so hard that a bunch of men had to jump in and pull her out. She had done it with one of the men that night, right up on the bank while everybody else partied. She remembers him moving on top of her, throbbing and breathing hard. She wonders now if anyone had seen them, and is amazed that she had never even cared before.

Still, she wants this. She wants a change, and in a town like Black Banks, this is the most you can change. There are only two kinds of people here: sinners and Christians. She wants to try a new crowd.

She is happy when the preacher calls to tell her that the church has decided it will be best to use the river. In the winter, they use the baptistry that they had built in the church, but during the hot months they like to use the river. She can picture it, all of the people standing on the bank singing and slapping tambourines. She loves the feel of

river water, as it is always moving. Pushing on, not letting anything stand in its way.

On Friday she calls everyone she knows to invite them to her baptism. Most of them say they will be there, but a lot of them have excuses, too. Excuses Liz herself has used many times to escape similar situations. She is no fool. Everyone sounds genuinely shocked at the prospect of her going to church, too. One of her honky-tonk friends laughs out loud when Liz invites her. "Lord, Liz, if you start going to church, the roof will cave in!" she says. Liz can't help herself—she hangs up on her.

And now, on the very morning of her baptism, Charma says she is not going. The baby is crying, but she stands at the stove, stirring eggs and bouncing him on her hip. She talks over his cries. "I'm not going to go there and watch you make a fool out of yourself, Mother." She shifts the baby to her other hip. "Because you know good and damn well that come next month, you'll be right back at the Spot. You'll be down on the lake with Bruce. You are not going to change, and we both know that."

"Can't you give me the benefit of the doubt?"

Charma doesn't look at her. With one hand she pours the eggs out onto a plate. Behind her morning light falls in the window in a white glare, so that Liz cannot see her face. "I've never understood that phrase," Charma says.

"Can't you believe in me this once, Charma Diane?"

From halfway across the kitchen, Charma throws the plate onto the table. When it hits, the eggs bounce off and scatter off the edge and onto the floor. "When did you ever believe in me?"

Liz wants to tell Charma that she is right. She knows that she was never a good mother. Marrying one man after another, sleeping with men she brought home from the honky-tonk. People always at the house, drinking liquor and smoking dope right in the living room. Once she had been sitting in a man's lap and taking a shot of bourbon he had poured for her and just as she brought the glass down, she saw Charma standing in the hallway, watching her. She was only four years old, and she had dragged the bedspread from her room. "I had a bad dream," Charma said, but instead of going to her, instead of packing her back to bed and tucking her in, Liz had shouted, "Go back to bed! Quit spying on me." And Charma had simply turned around and

shuffled back down the hallway, the bedspread trailing along behind her. Liz thinks now of how Charma must have felt, lying there in the darkness, afraid, listening to her mother's laughter in the living room. Liz is more ashamed of that moment than any other in her life and she wants to ask for Charma's forgiveness, but she can't find the right words. She knows if she doesn't say it exactly right, Charma will just laugh at her, or get even madder.

Without another word, she stands and takes her purse, which is hanging from the back of the chair, and puts it on her shoulder. She walks outside and waits on the porch for Avalene. She is dying for a cigarette, but she doesn't smoke one. She concentrates on the blue mountains in the distance until Avalene's car coughs its way up the road.

IT IS AN IMPOSSIBLY PERFECT DAY. It looks like something out of a movie. The sky is just right—completely blue—and a little breeze moves through the willows lining the river. The people are all standing on the bank and seem very far away. The preacher puts one hand into the small of her back and whispers, "Take a deep breath." Before doing so, she scans the crowd one more time. She doesn't know who she expects to see, but there is not one single person she knows besides Avalene, who is bawling into a ragged Kleenex. None of her girlfriends, not even Zelda. Had she really thought Bruce would be there? He is at home watching CNN while Lanie is at the Presbyterian Sunday service. Worst of all, Charma is not here. She had hoped she might come up out of the water and see Charma, approval stamped across her face.

"Liz?" The pastor says. "Take a deep breath."

He caps his hand over her mouth and then "In the name of the father and the son and the Holy Ghost," and he is leaning her back. It is like being dipped during a dance. She is underwater for what seems a very long time, but she is not afraid. She feels like she could lie there in that water from now on. She can hear the river moving beside her ears. She can taste the water that seeps in between the pastor's big fingers. She is under so long that she has time to open her eyes. And all she can see is light, slanting down onto the river's surface.